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PP RUEHBC RUEHKUK RUEHMOS

DE RUEHIHL #0034 0611833

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FM REO HILLAH

TO RUEHGB/AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD PRIORITY 0548

RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0563

INFO RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE

RUEHIHL/REO HILLAH 0610

C O N F I D E N T I A L HILLAH 000034

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 3/2/2016

TAGS: PREL PGOV KISL I2

SUBJECT: SOUTH CENTRAL, SOUTHERN IRAQI OFFICIALS DISCUSS SHRINE SECURITY, RELIGIOUS TOURISM

CLASSIFIED BY: Alfred Fonteneau, Regional Coordinator, REO Hillah, Department of State.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶11. (U) This is a SET Najaf cable.

¶12. (SBU) Summary: Provincial Council (PC) members, Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) officers and other officials from the predominantly Shi'a South Central and Southern Iraqi provinces met March 1 in Najaf to discuss the protection of holy shrines in the aftermath of the Al-Askariyah bombing in Samarra. The attendees issued recommendations including improving the equipment of the shrine protection forces, involving the tribes in shrine security, and better securing the perimeter of the Imam Ali Shrine in Najaf. The attendees also discussed security and economic aspects of the South Central region's religious tourism industry. End summary.

¶13. (C) The March 1 conference took place at midday under tight security at the Najaf Hotel, a large hotel just down the street from the Najaf Governorate Center. According to local SET Najaf staff who attended the event, streets were blocked and there was a heavy Iraqi Police (IP) and Iraqi Army (IA) presence. Attendees included delegations of PC members and IP and IA officers from Najaf, Karbala, Babil, Diwaniyah, Wasit and Maysan. The Najaf PC Chair, Abdul Hussein Al-Mousawi, attended the event, as did Deputy Governor Abdul Hussein Abtan, who opened the conference with a speech in which he described the protection of holy shrines as a national and a religious duty.

¶14. (C) The purpose of the conference was primarily to discuss the protection of the Shi'a holy shrines in the wake of the Samarra bombing. Most of the formal recommendations agreed upon by the attendees dealt with this issue. The conference called for establishing a special shrine protection force to guard the Al-Askariyah Shrine, replacing the IPs who currently protect the site. The force would be created on the model of the guard forces charged with protecting the shrines of Najaf and Karbala.

¶15. (C) The conference also called for involving the national and provincial governments in the shrine guard forces, and to better equip these forces with bomb-detection equipment and metal detectors. The conference also suggested enlisting the tribes in the protection of the more remote holy places.

¶16. (C) In Najaf, the participants suggested expanding the perimeter of the Imam Ali Shrine and constructing a more secure wall around the site, rather than the fence that now surrounds the mosque. The suggestion would necessitate tearing down several large hotels, which form a district known as "Visitors' City," adjacent to the shrine which have typically served as the lodging place for hundreds of pilgrims at a time.

¶7. (C) The attendees also discussed religious tourism. The conference moved to establish a committee from the Provincial Councils to investigate creating a database that would log all Arab and foreign (non-Arab) visitors to the shrines of Najaf and Karbala. (Note: The shrines draw a significant number of Shi'a pilgrims from non-Arab countries such as Iran, Pakistan and India. End note.) The group also recommended expanding the number of pilgrimage travel companies that exist outside of Najaf and Karbala. Such an expansion would, the participants hoped, spread the wealth of the millions of pilgrims who visit the twin shrine cities annually to the other provinces of South Central and Southern Iraq.

FONTENEAU